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Citation for published version:

Harris, M 2018, 'On 'the natural nature of naturalism': Answers to John Hedley Brooke's questions', *Zygon*, vol. 53, no. 4, pp. 1057-1063. <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12466>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/zygo.12466](https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12466)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Zygon

Publisher Rights Statement:

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On ‘the natural nature of naturalism’: Answers to John Hedley Brooke’s questions

Abstract

In John Hedley Brooke’s response to my 2018 Boyle Lecture he provided some helpful prompts to sharpen my position on naturalism, and posed two further questions to me. This article takes up his prompts, and offers some answers to his questions, especially concerning the resurrection of Jesus.

Keywords: Miracle, divine action, resurrection, naturalistic explanation, naturalism, natural sciences, hermeneutics, New Testament, Paul, Gospels

In borrowing John Hedley Brooke’s (2018) resonant phrase, ‘the natural nature of naturalism’ for my title, I aim to return his compliment in responding to my Boyle Lecture; he has sharpened my focus, and posed two questions to me. Like Fretheim’s term ‘hypernature’ which I use in my Boyle Lecture (Harris 2018), Brooke’s phrase helps to elucidate some of the elusive qualities of naturalism for further theological reflection. I am therefore enormously grateful for his comments, and for the opportunity he has given me to develop further my thoughts on science and the interpretation of biblical miracle and apocalypse stories.

Conventional talk of naturalism today often serves to close down theological approaches to nature rather than allow them to flourish, by assuming that Hume’s definition of miracle holds whereby there can be no divine activity in the normal course of nature. Hence, naturalistic interpretations of the Bible’s stories of miracle and apocalypse are often taken as

being deflationary towards theology, ‘explaining away’ miracle claims rather than providing creative means of reflecting upon them within a scientific worldview. My Boyle Lecture tries to suggest a more subtle picture, where naturalistic explanations can even lend themselves to a natural theology of the Bible’s stories of miracle and apocalypse.

As Brooke points out in his response, the natural science of past centuries was read by its practitioners in a variety of theistic and non-theistic ways when the question of divine causation was in view. Some saw a naturalistic explanation of a phenomenon or a miracle story as excluding divine intervention, while others took it as confirmation. As Brooke (2018) put it so memorably, ‘during its fascinating history there has been no “natural” nature of naturalism. It has existed in a variety of theistic and non-theistic forms.’ Another way of saying this, I suggest, is that there is no sharp or uncontested boundary between naturalism and natural theology: not only do they overlap, but there is a sense in which they can become the very same thing, depending upon how one construes the metaphysical foundations of the natural sciences. For this very reason, I find contemporary theological attempts to demarcate a self-consciously ‘theistic naturalism’ (or even ‘naturalistic theism’) unconvincing: the standard-issue naturalism of the natural sciences can be magnificently theistic of its own accord if one is so disposed, without any need to add extra theological bells and whistles. In the same way, I cannot join with those theists who warn against naturalism (even methodological naturalism) as though it is virtual atheism (Plantinga 2011; Torrance 2017). This, to me, misunderstands the activity of the natural sciences and their history. Again, as Brooke has said: there is no natural nature of naturalism.

But Brooke makes this point perfectly in his own historical way, and my own contemporary theistic gloss here acts simply to underscore the point even further. Hence, I wouldn’t

normally consider responding to such a helpful response as Brooke's, if it weren't for the fact that he has posed two questions to me.

Brooke's first question concerns the naturalistic assumptions of critical biblical scholarship. In setting biblical scholars up as the uniformitarians to the catastrophism of the natural scientists who write on biblical miracles, I have suggested that the former group have a methodological naturalism of their own which relies on the uniformity of human myth-making and story telling throughout all ages. If this is so, then 'how do biblical scholars decide whether their historical trajectories for the content of biblical texts are destructive or affirmative of faith', Brooke asks. My answer is that it depends on whose faith is at issue. If we're talking about the faith of those distant people of the Ancient Near East who first recounted the stories and traditions that we possess in the Bible, and who eventually preserved them in writing for us, then biblical scholars are intensely concerned to investigate, to understand, and to preserve the details of those historical people's faith as accurately as possible, in the form of *modern* historiographical accounts of *ancient* theology. But if we're talking about the living faith of modern-day Bible readers (including the biblical scholars themselves), then the question of destruction or affirmation is (in principle) quite irrelevant to the historical exercise. Biblical scholars working in the historical-critical paradigm are required to 'check their faith at the door' in pursuit of the best historiography. This means that, when Brooke asks the second part of this question, concerning what predispositions come into play concerning transcendence and revelation in the miracle stories, my answer to this (again) depends very much on whose predispositions are under the microscope: ancient or modern people? In practice, of course, one notices that a modern scholar's faith predispositions can indeed influence their historiography (despite protestations to the contrary); the long-running debate on the historical Moses is a good example. While biblical

scholars with conservative Christian or Jewish pedigrees often maintain that there is a basic historicity surrounding Moses, few others are concerned.

In Brooke's second question, faith predispositions come even more to the fore. Noticing the crucial 'almost' in my assertion that 'there's almost nothing in the Bible that the sciences can't explain', he asks astutely whether the resurrection of Jesus succumbs to a scientific approach, or is so sacrosanct to a Christian that she would prefer to maintain its impossibility by ringfencing it from naturalistic incursions. In tiresome academic fashion, my answer is neither yes nor no, since I don't see the issues surrounding the resurrection in either/or terms. This is a complex area (which is why I didn't touch on it in my Boyle Lecture), and at least four factors need to be weighed up.

First, whatever other areas of thought we may bring to bear in addressing Brooke's question, I would regard it as first and foremost a matter of interpretation of the primary evidence of the resurrection at our disposal, namely the New Testament. But no New Testament passage attempts to describe what happened in the resurrection of Jesus; as an event in time and space it is shrouded in mystery. Instead, what we tend to find are thoroughly theological statements, such as 'God raised him from the dead' (Acts 13:30; Rom.10:9), which make no attempt to describe what happened in naturalistic terms, nor even to help us understand precisely what 'raised him' might mean. The closest we come to a discussion of what the resurrection entails is Paul's riposte to those Corinthian Christians who claimed that 'there is no resurrection of the dead' (1 Cor.15:12). We don't know precisely what the Corinthians were arguing beyond this statement, but Paul's response makes it clear that he does indeed believe in the resurrection of the dead, since Christ is its 'firstfruits' (v.20). Moreover, the risen Jesus is visible, since Paul mentions witnesses (vv.5-8), and yet the resurrection body is not entirely

like our own: it is both bodily and ‘spiritual’ (*pneumatikon*; v.44); it is imperishable and immortal (vv.52-4); our present bodies, in relation to the resurrection body, are like seeds which must be sown before their full potential is revealed (vv.35-8); but this is ultimately all ‘a mystery’ (v.51). From that point of view, Brooke’s question whether the resurrection is so sacrosanct that it is beyond science could be answered in the affirmative, although my reading of the New Testament suggests a nuance here: it’s not because the resurrection is sacrosanct that we are unable to describe it in naturalistic terms, but because it’s a profound secret.

Second, when it comes to interpreting the witness reports contained in the New Testament, there has been controversy since the earliest days, including over attempts to introduce naturalistic explanations of the evidence. The empty tomb story in the Four Gospels has been (and remains) a particular target for those who wish to ‘explain away’ the resurrection story naturalistically. Matthew’s Gospel records an early example. After Jesus is raised, the guards at the tomb report to the chief priests, who charge the guards with maintaining that Jesus’ disciples came and stole the body away while the guards were asleep (Matt.28:11-15). Now Matthew clearly includes this detail precisely because it’s a matter of debate in his own day, some decades later (‘And this story is told among the Jews to this day’; v.15). And clearly, Matthew hopes to discredit this naturalistic interpretation, by recounting the empty tomb story from Mark’s earlier Gospel with some significant additions. In particular, Matthew goes considerably further than Mark in overegging the apocalyptic and stupendous happenings around the resurrection of Jesus, all presumably with the aim of demonstrating that something quite otherworldly and unique has happened to Jesus, to the extent that he is alive again in bodily form. There are earthquakes (Matt.27:51; 28:2), an angel who descends from heaven (28:2), the bodily resurrection of many of the ‘saints’ in the tombs who go about appearing to

the people of Jerusalem (27:52-53), and the visible appearance of Jesus alive in bodily form to the women (28:9-10) and to the eleven disciples (28:16-20). Hence, Matthew's version of the story draws explicit parallels with the traditions of Jewish apocalyptic, in order to provide confirmation for his Jewish readers that what happened to Jesus is fully in accord with Jewish expectations, which includes the *bodily* resurrection of the dead.

A rather different controversy appears to be reflected in Luke's and John's accounts of the risen Jesus, although both evangelists emphasise the tangible physicality of Jesus' resurrection body. For example, 'Touch me and see;' says the risen Jesus to his disciples in Luke, 'for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have' (Luke 24:39). It's often supposed that Luke is reacting here to a docetic interpretation of the resurrection in his own day (perhaps related to that which Ignatius of Antioch challenged in the early second century), where the risen Jesus is said to be a spiritual apparition, like a ghost. Luke goes to some lengths to insist that, although the risen Jesus could appear and disappear at will (e.g. Luke 24:31), yet he was bodily like any other living human, not a ghost. Luke's Jesus can interact and engage with other humans in an entirely natural and personal way: he can be touched, he can eat, and when he departs to heaven, he *ascends* in bodily form within Luke's cosmology (Luke 24:50-51). Indeed, the ascension is the pivot on which Luke's two-volume work (Luke-Acts) turns, and so it's in Luke's theological interests to emphasise the bodily reality of the risen Jesus against any docetising tendencies. (And it is interesting to note that something like the docetic/ghost interpretation remains widespread today among many Christians, who also prefer to emphasise the *spiritual* dimension of resurrection over its potential *bodiliness*. Of course, claiming that the risen Jesus is primarily a spiritual entity (a 'ghost') is no more scientific/naturalistic than affirming his bodily resurrection, but the ghost interpretation does have the advantage that it fits more neatly into the abiding substance

dualism of many modern Christians, who believe that their entirely-spiritual souls will go to an entirely-spiritual heaven when they die).

The point I am trying to make is that the idea of resurrection – whether of all the dead or just of Jesus – has never been uncontroversial, even among Christians, and that these controversies are even built into the primary evidence, namely the New Testament texts. In other words, we have no neutral access to the event of resurrection; our accounts – whether by Paul or by the Gospel writers – already show plentiful signs that they are promoting their own theological interpretations against others.

To summarise this second point then, just as I suggested in my Boyle Lecture concerning the sea crossing text of Exodus, the resurrection texts of the New Testament don't provide us with 'value-free' evidence. The texts already contain theological interpretation, re-interpretation, and evaluation of later controversies *which are built into the very story itself*. In other words, Brooke's question about the scientific impossibility of the event of resurrection presupposes that we know what it means to speak in metaphysical terms about the reality of the event. Instead, I suggest that the reality we need to wrestle with is that of the texts: the question is more hermeneutical and epistemological than it is metaphysical.

Third, there are important perspectives to bring to bear from the contemporary science-and-religion dialogue. In the previous paragraphs I went into the issues surrounding interpretation of the New Testament resurrection texts at some length, because I suspect that these will be less familiar to *Zygon* readers. More familiar, I imagine, will be those contemporary treatments of the resurrection of Jesus by science-and-religion scholars John Polkinghorne (2002), David Wilkinson (2010), R. J. Russell (2008; 2012), and Frank Tipler (2007). I will

therefore be brief here, but the point I want to make is that these scholars present a *third* factor to account for in answering Brooke's question. While none of them seeks to 'explain away' the resurrection stories, nor to suggest a biological mechanism that might bring a dead man's body back to life, yet all three affirm the bodily resurrection of Jesus in naturalistic terms by exploring its eschatological implications through the lenses of modern physics and cosmology. In other words, none of these scholars regards the resurrection as so sacrosanct that modern science might not have something useful to say.

Fourth, this brings me to the final factor to bear in mind when answering Brooke's question about the supposed scientific impossibility of the resurrection of Jesus, namely the question's implicit assumption that the resurrection is a Humean miracle which breaks a law of nature, and is therefore literally 'impossible' in naturalistic terms. Following Wolfhart Pannenberg, R. J. Russell (2008; 2012) has explored the intriguing possibility that, while the resurrection may be impossible according to our current laws of nature, yet in the new creation there will be a law of nature so that all of the dead will be raised. The resurrection of Jesus is a completely unique occurrence (in this world) of something that will be universal in the next; it is the 'first instantiation of a new law of nature' (FINLON, in Russell's parlance). Now while the resurrection of Jesus is, on this account, something like a Humean miracle in our world, it most definitely isn't in the world to come. Appearances of the risen Jesus effectively occur in a bubble of new creation which is visible from our creation. While I am personally not-entirely convinced by this model (Harris 2014a), it does indirectly affirm a major strand of theological thought in the New Testament concerning resurrection, namely that *the resurrection of Jesus is a new creation, and a sign of such*. In other words, the resurrection of Jesus might appear to possess the characteristics of a Humean miracle, yet in New Testament theological terms it's an act of creation. And if the resurrection is an act of creation, then the

scientific question of whether or not it's a naturalistic impossibility becomes less relevant compared with its *theological* import.

To bring this rather lengthy reply to Brooke's question on the resurrection of Jesus to a close, I have raised four factors which, I believe, need to be weighed up before taking a view on the scientific impossibility of the resurrection, or the degree to which its sacrosanct nature (for Christians) takes it beyond reach. I have suggested that this is still (after two thousand years) an open question for many, not least because the nature of resurrection is shrouded from view, quite deliberately on the part of its key player (God), if the New Testament witness is to be believed ('*God* raised Jesus'). The New Testament witness is – as I hope I've made clear – not unambiguous in these matters itself, and there remains much still to be done in developing an appropriate hermeneutic from the perspective of the science-and-religion field. This should be an important concern for the field's engagement with Christian belief, I feel, since it's in questions surrounding the incarnation of Christ – which include his resurrection and ascension (Harris 2014b) – that the interest of the science-and-religion field in this-worldly and other-worldly realities meet their sharpest point of focus. Hence (and this is my final answer to Brooke), far from wanting to foreclose on questions around the scientific/sacrosanct nature of resurrection, I suggest that it's essential they remain open, and remain in circulation.

But once again, I wish to thank John warmly for his razor-sharp comments and questions, which have taken me way beyond the content of my Boyle Lecture to some of the most elusive areas in the science-and-religion dialogue.

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